Research Summary
Working for Change
February 2024

Key Takeaways and Recommendations from *Working for Change*

Egale

2SLGBTQI people in Canada can experience hiring and workplace discrimination, harassment, and are overrepresented in precarious and low-wage employment (Brennan et al., 2021; Kinitz et al., 2022; Women and Gender Equality Canada, 2023). Two Spirit, trans, and nonbinary people can face significant disadvantages in many aspects of life, though most of note in this project are employment challenges and barriers (Fosbrook et al., 2020; Irving, 2015; Namaste, 2005).

Building upon an existing body of scholarship regarding 2SLGBTQI employment and workplace experiences, the *Working For Change* project aimed to better understand the employment challenges faced by Two Spirit, trans, and nonbinary (2STNB) people in Canada. Using mixed methods, we collected data through both semi-structured interviews and a national survey[1]. We found that 2STNB participants:

- Were subject to marked disadvantages and challenges when attempting to navigate the workforce.

- Experienced various forms of discrimination and harassment in their places of work.

- Left their jobs due to safety concerns and experiences of psychological harm.

- Experienced job loss due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the increase in precarious labour.

Intersectionally marginalized participants experienced unique employment barriers and experiences. This research summary presents key takeaways as well as emergent recommendations.

For more details, see Egale Canada's full research report **(Rodomar et al., 2023).**

This project was funded by Women and Gender Equality Canada.

1 Despite achieving strong participation of 2STNB participants in this study (*N* = 555 in the survey and *N* = 79 in the interviews), a methodological limitation to this national study is the sample is not representative of the population.

The *Working for Change* project involved multiple research methods:

A national survey (*N* = 555)

Interviews (*N* = 79)

Our research questions were:

1. **What are the employment, underemployment, and unemployment experiences of Two Spirit, trans, and nonbinary people?**

2. **How do Two Spirit, trans, and nonbinary people experience the workplace?**
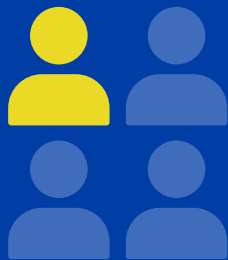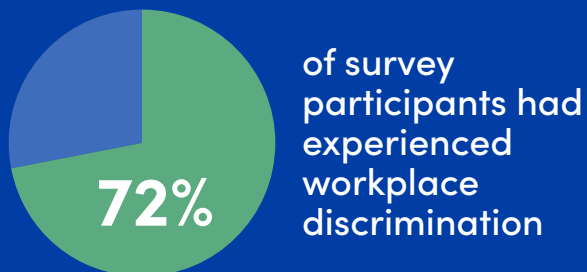
3. **What forms of bias, discrimination, and violence are present in places of employment?**

Key Takeaways

Being Two Spirit, Trans, and Nonbinary at Work

" There was not really any way for me to be my identity and also work at the same time, because the culture is quite toxic and very conservative. "

72% of survey participants had experienced workplace discrimination

Roughly **1** in **4** survey participants did not have their pronouns respected in the workplace

Participants' workplace experiences were impacted and compounded by transphobia, homophobia, racism, ableism, and ageism. Participants reported frequent experiences of workplace discrimination, which largely took the form of microaggressions and harassment, though some participants experienced verbal, sexual, and physical assault and abuse. Trans feminine and nonbinary participants read as feminine by others were most likely to report experiences of sexual harassment.

Participants working in trades and front-line positions reported significant levels of hostility and harmful workplace culture. Both Two Spirit and racialized participants experienced racist assumptions, behaviours, and comments from their coworkers. Many participants were not out at work about their gender identity, with both survey and interview participants keeping this part of their identity to themselves.

"A large part of being let go was that I didn't really fit the mold in terms of gender binary stuff."

49% of survey participants quit their job due to not feeling accepted in the workplace
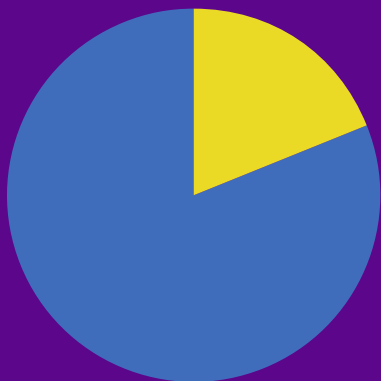
19% of survey participants felt they had been wrongfully fired for reasons related to their identity

Participants spoke of choosing to leave or quit their jobs due to workplace safety concerns and psychological harm, to pursue employment elsewhere, to become self-employed, and/or to pursue educational opportunities. Some participants experienced being laid off or let go for various reasons, including perceived discrimination, and job loss due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Industries that are traditionally male-dominated were particularly harmful for participants, and many felt unsafe in those workplaces.

"The jobs offered were very high stress, very fast paced. They did not wish to accommodate anything in regard to my autism or my chronic pain."

64.6% of interview participants and
67.2% of survey participants reported living with one or more disabilities

Participants with mental health conditions, neurodivergence, or physical disabilities frequently reported that they faced additional barriers to maintaining or even searching for gainful employment. Participants with disabilities were more likely to have temporal gaps on their resumes, unable to work full-time hours, and experienced discrimination and systemic ableism. Employment challenges were exacerbated for those living with chronic health conditions and mental health issues. Both housing precarity and lack of access to transportation were barriers to employment for 2STNB participants. The pursuit of post-secondary education and credentials was not available to all participants due to cost barriers, competing personal obligations, and fears of unwelcoming campus or learning environments.

"90% of my work experience has been either short term contracts or mainly gig work [...] I'm pretty much chronically underemployed, but also chronically overemployed [...] Underemployed in the sense that I'm not getting paid enough for the work that I do—not even close. But over employed in the sense that I am consistently and constantly thinking of my next job. My mind is constantly on work."
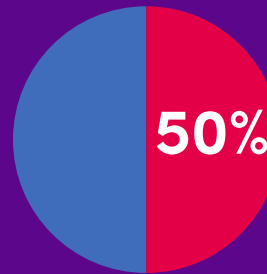
21.5% of interview participants and **13%** of survey participants report being unemployed
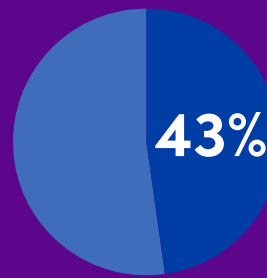
43% of survey participants experienced underemployment
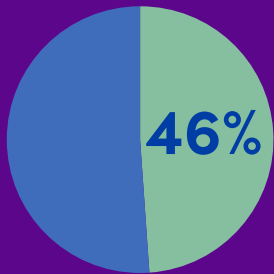
46% of survey participants had experienced unemployment since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020
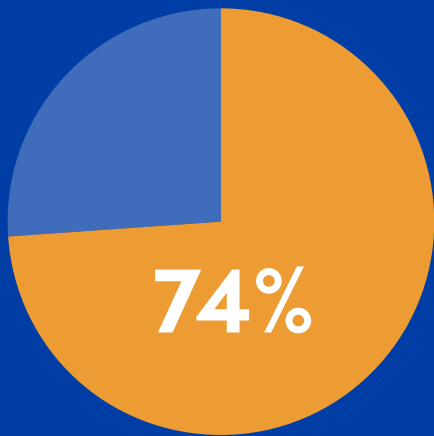
50% of survey participants reported having done gig work

In Canada, there is greater economic precarity due to the growth of temporary work being three-times that of permanent work (Kinitz et al., 2022). Many survey and interview participants reported having done gig work and were currently, or had been, under- and unemployed. In addition to navigating labour precarity, participants also reported a lack of support from, and difficulties accessing, social programs. Multiple interview participants spoke of having university degrees yet were unable to secure employment that reflected their educational level and expertise. Participants also experienced the "pink glass ceiling," wherein 2STNB employees were overrepresented in entry-level positions, with few opportunities for advancement and promotion. Many participants felt as though their gender identity was a key reason as to why they found themselves perpetually unemployed. Participants also cited mental health reasons as barriers to entry and re-entry into the workforce.

"*I've been trying to just be out about my gender identity and my sexuality since I've been back in Canada [...] I don't know if it's been negatively impacting me. I used to put my pronouns on my resume and stuff. And I just recently took those off because I was like, 'Maybe this just isn't helping.'*"

74% of survey participants reported hiding or minimizing aspects of their identity half, most, or all of the time when job seeking

2STNB participant's job seeking narratives make it predominantly clear that gender identity and its intersections with colonialism, race, and ability are significant barriers to employability. Many participants tailored their job searches and targeted employers who they believed would be less discriminatory. Some participants veered-away from 2SLGBTQI organizations as they did not want to be reduced to their gender identity or sexuality, or to be "professionally trans." In job application materials, participants would often either "tone down" their identity or "come out" explicitly. While being openly 2STNB can be an important part of an individual's quality of life and wellness, it may come at the cost of a secure income. Some participants worried about how they would be perceived in interviews, and some participants expressed anxiety concerning the first impressions that managers or human resources will have upon seeing them in person and/or hearing their voice.

Reflections on Employment Service Organizations (ESOs)

"I heard that this program really works with people that have different mental health challenges, obstacles, or diagnoses. I have an anxiety disorder. I was like, 'maybe that's a place that might be able to help me' because I was talking myself out of even applying for roles."

51% of survey participants were not aware of an employment service organization (ESO) in their area

**76%** of survey participants had never accessed this type of service

Those who had accessed services at an ESO, **55%** reported their experience as fair or poor

Many participants believed that ESOs could offer significant assistance for finding suitable jobs for them, mentorship opportunities, as well as honing practical skills that will help them on the job market. However, participants also noted negative experiences with staff at ESOs, that the job opportunities provided were geared toward low-wage, part-time, and precarious positions, and a lack of cultural sensitivity and awareness.

"The moment I started being respected, even just by a few people, and I had my co-workers using my pronouns, I felt so hopeful."

64%
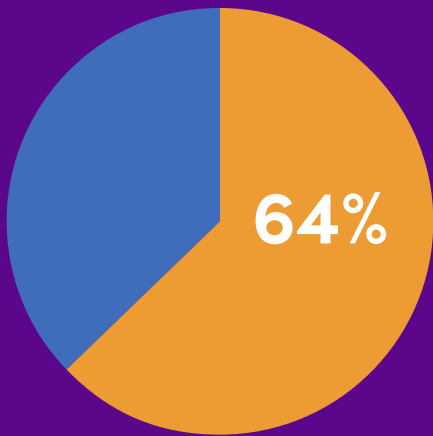
of survey participants reported that their employer fostered a healthy and safe environment for employees or all identities

Affirming work environments had structural factors in place such as inclusive policies and practices, employee resource groups, training and education, health benefits, and supportive and responsive managers, supervisors, and colleagues. 2STNB interview participants felt supported and affirmed when workplaces clearly communicated and followed EDI policies. Mandated workplace training and educational initiatives were noted as factors that contributed to an inclusive and affirming workplace, and how for some participants, this reduced the burden of having to educate others about queer and trans identities and issues in the workplace. Allyship practices in the workplace included careful and considerate use of language (e.g., gender inclusive) including respecting names and pronouns, standing up for others at work, and self-reflexivity and a commitment to ongoing learning.

Recommendations

Recommendations for Employers

- Implement ongoing and comprehensive workplace education and training for staff, managers, members of hiring teams, and human resources on (a) 2SLGBTQI inclusion, including specific promising practices to foster inclusion (e.g., respecting names, pronouns), (b) neurodiversity and mental health, and (c) anti-racism, anti-oppression, and decolonization to ensure the inclusion of, and respect for, Two Spirit, trans, and nonbinary (2STNB) job applicants and employees.

- Update policies and practices, including hiring and onboarding practices, to ensure the inclusion and safety of 2STNB job applicants and employees. This includes the development and implementation of strong inclusion and anti-discrimination policies, and trans-affirming practices around names and pronouns. These policies should be accessible by employees and job applicants.

- Establish and communicate a system of accountability for when issues of discrimination or harassment against 2STNB staff arise in the workplace.

- Hire, retain, and promote 2STNB people, including into leadership positions.

- Provide mentorship, coaching, and professional development opportunities to 2STNB staff and support their performance development and growth in the workplace.

- Implement flexible working hours and position structuring (e.g., full-time, part-time) where possible to allow for greater accessibility and flexibility for 2STNB employees with mental health issues, caregiving duties, disabilities and healthcare challenges, and those who are in training or in educational programs.

- Support 2STNB employee participation on workplace committees.

- Provide comprehensive access to gender affirming healthcare benefits and paid time off for transition-related care.

Recommendations for Allies in the Workplace

- Foster an inclusive, welcoming, and safe workplace culture for 2STNB colleagues.

- Respect pronouns, names, and use gender inclusive language.

- Commit to ongoing learning about 2SLGBTQI inclusion in the workplace through humility, self-reflexivity, and education.

- Commit to ongoing learning and education about anti-racism, anti-oppression, anti-ableism, settler colonialism, and the calls to action from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Do not place the educational burden on 2STNB colleagues.

- Stand up for others and don't be afraid to have difficult conversations.

- Advocate for inclusion practices in the workplace (e.g., pronouns in emails, name signatures) and take part in this allyship practice. These actions alleviate the educational burden often placed on 2STNB people.

Recommendations for Government & Systems Change

- Implement a universal basic income for all.

- Increase minimum wage to a livable wage.

- Invest in accessible and affordable public transportation for all.

- Invest in secure, affordable, adequate, and safe housing for all.

- Invest in mental health services, including funding for community-based organizational programming focused on 2STNB mental health and Indigenous-led programs.

- Engage in intersectoral collaboration between federal departments, provincial departments, and territorial departments to ensure solutions to employment, housing, health, and mental health issues are intersectional and comprehensive.

- Ensure equitable access to social support programs. Provide navigational and translation support for those who may need it. This is particularly critical for immigrants, refugees, people with disabilities, and those living in rural, remote, and northern contexts.

- Full decriminalization of sex work in Canada. This is of critical importance due to the increased participation of 2STNB in sex work.

- Provide funding for Indigenous-led, Black-led, and POC-led employment support organizations, social supports, entrepreneurial programs, and mental health programs.

- Increase accessible funding for the arts, culture, and heritage sectors. This is of critical importance due to the participation of 2STNB people in these sectors.

Areas for Future Research

The results of the Working For Change study highlighted some key areas that merit further research. Qualitative studies could be used to learn more about the specific employment challenges of various identities and experiences that intersected with gender identity in the Working For Change data, including race, age, disability, and neurodiversity. Considering the profound effects of transmisogyny, a future study could be conducted that expands upon the study findings by focusing specifically on the experiences of transfeminine Canadians in the work force. Our interviews also highlighted the intersection of queerphobia and anti-Indigenous racism experienced by Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer individuals, data about which could be pursued in a more fulsome manner in a future qualitative study. Lastly, the experiences shared by study participants indicated that law and policy reviews could be conducted to examine the efficacy of anti-discrimination law in Canada, particularly the recent "pronoun law" as it is colloquially dubbed. Policy analysis could also be used to gain further insight into the various barriers that prevent individuals from marginalized communities from accessing adequate social support and services.

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